

A Return to Maximum Pressure: Comprehensively Countering the Iranian Regime's Malign Activities

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Articles & Testimony

The Washington Institute's director of research testifies on the Trump administration's best means of combining diplomatic, military, and congressional pressure to permanently block Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon or reconstituting its damaged regional threat network.

The following are prepared remarks submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Chairman Mast, Ranking Member Meeks, and distinguished members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on U.S. policy to counter Iran's destabilizing activities. In my view, the window is open for the United States to work with like-minded partners to advance opportunities in a region no longer held back by Iran's nefarious influence. To emphasize, this is a window of opportunity: how the United States proceeds in the coming months will determine whether a more stable and secure Middle East emerges from the post-October 7 environment. To press the advantage, Washington must be prepared to bring more to the table than pressure. Military force and sanctions are critical elements of strategy but insufficient on their own. The United States must lean into diplomacy as well, testing the possibility of a negotiated settlement that can prevent Iran's nuclear program from delivering weapons while also supporting new leaders across the region that oppose Tehran's interest in rebuilding its "axis of resistance." To implement a comprehensive strategy, the United States will need to empower its diplomats, work with allies and partners, restore assistance and stabilization programs, and maintain a robust military posture and security commitments across the Middle East.

Iran's strategy for regime survival has relied on decades-long investments in three key areas: (1) the nuclear weapons program, (2) its threat network of terrorists and proxies, and (3) its conventional missile arsenal. Tehran has used each of these pillars to threaten its neighbors, challenge Israel's existence, and try to push the United States

out of the region, all in the pursuit of imposing its will and vision on the Middle East.

Regional developments since October 7, 2023, have significantly reshaped the regional threat landscape. In the aftermath of Hamas's attack, Israel, with U.S. support, has systematically dismantled Iran's proxy network in Gaza, Lebanon, and elsewhere, disrupting the regime's ability to project power by funding, arming, and training nonstate groups. In Syria, Tehran lost its one Middle East strategic partner with the ouster of Bashar al-Assad, who had willingly permitted the use of Syrian territory for destabilizing Iranian activities. As a result, Tehran's ability to exert asymmetric pressure through its regional proxies has been greatly reduced. New leaders in Damascus and Beirut alike are working to stabilize their countries and do not want them to be dominated by Tehran. In Gaza, Palestinians have taken to the streets to protest against Hamas, signaling some resistance to the group's stranglehold on governance. These new leaders and movements on the ground will need long-term assistance and support.

The combination of Israel's offensive strikes inside Iran and U.S.-led defensive action in the region has lowered the fear barrier in confronting Iranian aggression. From the emergence of a U.S.-led regional air defense coalition in April 2024 to Israel's defeat of a large-scale ballistic missile attack in October, allies have demonstrated that Iran's complex conventional attacks and missile threats can be effectively countered. Israel's strikes inside Iran targeted key missile production facilities, disrupting the regime's ability to replenish critical components of its arsenal and degrading its strategic air defense systems. Tehran's military infrastructure is now exposed to future military action. These developments not only altered Iran's deterrence posture, but also reinforced the credibility of integrated air and missile defense networks in mitigating threats posed by state and nonstate actors in the region.

To build on this, the United States will need to prioritize the operational integration of partner air defenses across the region, which includes accelerating foreign military sales, providing security assistance funding, and prioritizing defense diplomacy. Washington will also need to maintain an increased military posture across the region in the medium term as the operational backbone for integration and deterrence.

In addition to its losses abroad, the regime is under pressure at home due to years of mismanagement, corruption, and sanctions. The sanctions architecture from the 2019 "maximum pressure" campaign remains in place and has been strengthened. Recent economic indicators reveal significant damage, including rising inflation, a depreciating currency, and growing fiscal deficits that limit the regime's ability to fund both domestic priorities and malign foreign activities. The economy and infrastructure are in crisis, with the rial losing half its value in just eight months and food prices soaring (e.g., the cost of potatoes rose 217 percent over the past year). Widespread power outages now affect twenty-one out of thirty-one provinces, while a worsening water crisis—driven by drought and climate change but largely blamed on government mismanagement—has turned into a national emergency. In a sign of growing regime anxiety over public unrest, authorities have temporarily paused full implementation of the draconian hijab and chastity bill and are releasing Green Movement leaders after fourteen years of house arrest. Yet continued protests are inevitable in light of the systemic corruption and persistent repression. In sum, Tehran is struggling to stabilize the economy while facing increased domestic unrest and challenges in sustaining its regional influence.

Yet sanctions alone cannot stop Iran's nuclear program. In the past, the regime responded to economic pressure by taking provocative nuclear steps or attacking the interests of its neighbors. Today, it is perilously close to crossing the nuclear weapons threshold. Rafael Grossi, the director-general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has expressed significant concern over Iran's uranium enrichment activities, stating that it is "pressing the gas pedal" by dramatically accelerating enrichment to near weapons-grade levels. He highlighted that Iran's production of uranium enriched to 60 percent purity has increased from approximately seven kilograms per month to over thirty, emphasizing that the Islamic Republic is the only non-nuclear-weapons state producing uranium at this high level of enrichment, which he finds "**seriously concerning (**

[east/iran-has-about-200-kg-uranium-enriched-near-bomb-grade-grossi-says-2025-01-22/](#).”

Since the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, Iran has significantly advanced its nuclear capabilities. It has expanded its stockpile of high-enriched uranium and is now producing fissile material at enrichment levels and in quantities far beyond the JCPOA’s original limits. Additionally, it has installed and operated advanced centrifuges at key facilities such as Natanz and Fordow, increasing the rate of enrichment and shortening its capacity to stage a quick breakout. The regime has also restricted international oversight by limiting cooperation with the IAEA, reducing transparency over its nuclear activities. As my Washington Institute colleague Michael Singh **[pointed out \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/policy-steps-prevent-nuclear-iran\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/policy-steps-prevent-nuclear-iran)** in a recent paper for the Trump administration, Iran could have sufficient weapons-grade uranium for a weapon in just days and could produce a usable weapon in six months or less.

Although Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard **[recently testified \(https://jewishinsider.com/2025/03/gabbard-iran-is-not-currently-developing-nuclear-weapons/\)](https://jewishinsider.com/2025/03/gabbard-iran-is-not-currently-developing-nuclear-weapons/)** that Iran is not actively pursuing a nuclear weapon at this time, the U.S. intelligence community **[has warned \(https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2024/4036-iran-s-nuclear-weapons-capability-and-terrorism-monitoring-act-of-2022-assessment-regarding-the-regional-and-global-terrorism-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-november-2024\)](https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2024/4036-iran-s-nuclear-weapons-capability-and-terrorism-monitoring-act-of-2022-assessment-regarding-the-regional-and-global-terrorism-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-november-2024)** for the past year that regime nuclear experts are engaging in activities that better position Tehran to develop a nuclear device should the leadership decide to do so. These activities include work on uranium metal production, which has direct weapons applications, and advancements in explosive technologies relevant to nuclear warhead development. While Iran insists that these measures are for civilian energy and research purposes, the pattern of activity suggests that it is methodically reducing the time needed to weaponize if it chooses to move in that direction. The intelligence community has long assessed that Tehran’s decisionmaking is the only thing precluding a breakout, not any technical inhibition. A crucial question for this hearing, therefore, is whether we can keep Iran from making that decision.

President Trump has indicated that while economic and military pressure will continue, his preferred path for addressing Iran’s nuclear ambitions remains diplomacy and negotiation. As the administration considers potential talks, it must address several questions. The first is the scope of any agreement—whether negotiations will focus solely on the nuclear program (as with the 2015 JCPOA) or seek a more comprehensive deal that also addresses support for terrorist organizations, proxy militias, and the missile, space-launch, and drone programs. Second, the administration must decide whether to pursue a unilateral negotiation strategy or engage in a multilateral framework involving key allies such as Israel, European partners, and Gulf states. A multilateral approach could enhance enforcement mechanisms and diplomatic legitimacy, but it would also slow the process.

A good deal, as National Security Advisor Mike Waltz has emphasized, would be one that permanently blocks Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon rather than just delaying its capability. It must include consistent, regular inspections to ensure full transparency and prevent the regime from exploiting loopholes. The Trump administration should prioritize testing Tehran’s willingness to reach a diplomatic deal on the nuclear program while also preparing to set the program back through military means should diplomacy fail.

Yet the time window to test Iran’s openness to negotiate is short, partly due to the looming October expiration of remaining restrictions on the nuclear program via UN Security Council Resolution 2231, and also because of Iran’s current exposure to Israeli military strikes. Policymakers should assume that Russia and China will work with Iran to rebuild its military-industrial capacity and air defenses, limiting the scope of what can be achieved through military strikes beyond the near term. Moscow and Beijing are already supporting Tehran diplomatically, so Washington will need to prepare for a complex negotiation in which these powers do not contribute to a diplomatic process like they did as part of the P5+1. Also unclear is how Russia and China would respond should Iran decide to weaponize.

To strengthen the U.S. approach toward Iran, the administration needs a hard-nosed diplomatic plan backed by economic and military leverage:

- To effectively signal U.S. resolve in pursuit of an agreement, the administration should clearly articulate how sanctions relief would be structured if Iran dismantles its nuclear program and exports key elements out of the country. A well-defined framework for phased economic relief would provide clarity on the benefits of compliance. This is also an area where Congress can contribute.
- At the same time, the administration must continue taking steps to keep its military options open. This includes maintaining a robust U.S. military presence in the region, strengthening regional air and missile defense capabilities, and reinforcing America's commitment to deterring Iranian aggression against Israel and Gulf allies. The recent announcements about sending a second aircraft carrier to the region and deploying B-2 bombers to Diego Garcia are important steps in reinforcing U.S. readiness to use military force.
- Congress can further strengthen the administration's hand by beginning the process to conditionally authorize the use of military force against Iran's nuclear program if the regime proves unwilling to take sufficient steps to ensure that it will not acquire nuclear weapons.
- The United States must closely coordinate with its allies and partners, particularly in the Middle East and Europe, to ensure a unified approach to countering Iran. Strong engagement with European allies will help reinforce the legitimacy of any negotiated agreement and maintain transatlantic pressure on Tehran. Likewise, consultation with key Middle Eastern countries, including Israel and the Gulf states, is essential to aligning regional security strategies and preventing Iran from exploiting divisions between partners. This engagement will be crucial to blunting spoiler policies from Russia and China.
- Engaging regional leaders is essential to consolidating military gains against Iran and preventing it from reconstituting its threat network. Providing military assistance and intelligence-sharing to partners will enhance their ability to counter Iran's influence and contribute to stability. Restoring assistance to emerging leaders while pressing for reforms—particularly in Lebanon and Syria—can further incentivize cooperation and support their long-term development, ensuring they remain resilient against destabilizing Iranian efforts. Assistance provision and diplomatic engagement should be coordinated with European and Arab allies.
- To pressure the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, the administration should ensure that its current air campaign exclusively targets Houthi military assets and mitigates civilian harm, while actively seeking ways to support the Yemeni people, including humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts. Increasing maritime and overland interdiction efforts will prevent Iran from resupplying the Houthis, limiting their ability to wage prolonged conflict. Additionally, working closely with the Saudis and Emiratis on a political process aimed at ending Yemen's civil war will create a pathway for peace and stability in the region.

In conclusion, the executive and legislative branches can take a number of steps in the coming months to better position the United States to take advantage of regional opportunities. Real opportunities exist to block Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapons capability and consolidate military gains against its destabilizing activities. To do this, the United States must fully resource all elements of its national power and apply them to the Middle East: not only military operations and sanctions, but also assistance, stabilization, and diplomacy.

Dana Stroul is the director of research and Kassen Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former deputy assistant secretary for the Middle East at the Pentagon. ❖

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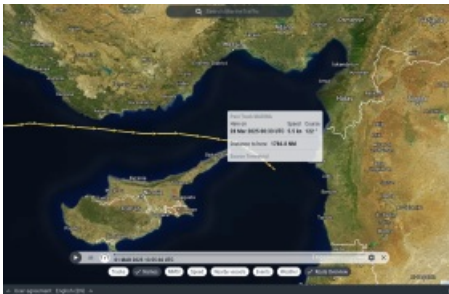
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